

# Final Exam

313-1, fall 2006

The exam is a take home essay. It is due Tuesday Dec. 5 at 10 am in my mailbox at 1800 Sherman. For a backup, also send me an email copy [chuckkle@northwestern.edu]. Undergrads should also email a copy to Gabriel Dor [rgdor@northwestern.edu]. At this point in the course we've seen and considered many documentaries from the history of cinema. Your essay should reflect your capacity to draw on that knowledge to write a focused essay. It will be graded on quality of thought and analysis and ability to support general statements with specific details from the reading and screenings. You are encouraged to develop your answer with reference to knowledge gained in other courses, additional screenings, and so forth. You can refer to books on reserve for the course as well, but this is not a research paper. Rather your ideas are the most important resource you have.

You can modify this exam by starting with one of the questions and using different examples, etc. You can choose films available at the Medi Center, or current and recent theatrical documentaries. But, you need to run this by Gabriel (for undergrads) or Chuck (for grads) a week before the exam is due to make sure you are headed in the right direction. The Grant anthology has discussion of many recent significant documentaries which could be considered as well.

1. Films such as **Columbia Revolt** and **79 Springtimes of Ho Chi Minh** take a clear activist stand. They are made as part of a self-conscious political movement and contribute to advancing the goals of the movement. Discuss advocacy documentary with attention to the following issues: the use of voice, objectivity, ethical position, information, and persuasion. You may extend your argument with reference to documentaries made in support of other issues such as environmentalism, AIDS activism, peace issues, gay and lesbian issues, etc. This can extend your earlier discussion of propaganda on the midterm, but you should go beyond that earlier work.

2. **Don't Look Back**, **Gray Gardens**, **Dry Wood**, and many other cinema verite documentaries often depend on great skill by the cinematographer in shooting spontaneous events with a hand-held camera. Choose three such works by three different cinematographers and discuss the camera work and also the editing (sound and image). Don't be deceived--this is a very difficult question unless you are one of those people with a distinct feel for camera work. You may illustrate your analysis with frame grabs or clips (no more than 10 min.) to accompany the paper.

3. Compare and contrast **Don't Look Back** with **Truth or Dare**. Both present a "behind the scenes" view of a famous star. But Madonna was totally aware of the camera's presence and produced (and had final cut) over her film. Discuss the issues of documentary "truth" in dealing with a celebrity, different issues in presentation, and questions that arise in centering a film on an attractive woman and gazing at her body. Consider too where gender and racial power are always present, and why we are fascinated with learning the "inside story" of someone who is always acting anyway. Can we ever learn the "truth" about Madonna or Dylan?

4. Nichols and Williams discuss **The Thin Blue Line** and a number of other documentaries in terms of an irony or skepticism in which it seems the film does not want to definitely take a side but rather raises questions about the nature of knowledge and truth and objectivity. Analyze this in terms of documentary narration and referring to **The Thin Blue Line** and some other films seen in the course. You may include one or two other “postmodern” documentaries in your discussion.

5. Since its beginning, documentary has been used to show one group of people “the Other”. Thus Flaherty brought us Nanook, Les Blank brought us Cajun people, Schub showed us how the Czar and his court lived, Ivens filmed the Spanish Republicans, Stoney portrayed an Alabama midwife. Discuss the issues raised by filmmakers presenting “Others” when there is a considerable power difference between the two. When is it justified and why? What ethical issues are present? How do we understand “informed consent”? Discuss this in relation to several films including **In Plain English** and **Harvest of Shame**. Your analysis should include a discussion of narration and the nature of audience viewing the “Others” represented in the work.

6. Unlike most film seen in the course, **Manhatta**, **In the Street**, and **Landscape Suicide** gain most of their expressive power from visuals alone without the use of the human voice. Discuss the potentials and limits of documentaries which rely primarily on visual communication and discuss the limits of critical/intellectual bias toward the spoken word. Your discussion should address issues of the pleasure in viewing and hearing documentary.

7. Although Nichols discusses various pleasures in documentary, he finds that overall documentary discourse falls into “sobriety,” rather than entertainment. However, the development of reality tv [NOT including competition shows, but rather observation and reportage shows such as **Cops**, **Rescue 911**, **Unsolved Mysteries**, **Real Sex**, **48 Hours**, etc.] has produced what can be called “docutainment”--the use of documentary forms and techniques but with a goal of making effective entertainment. Discuss this issue and develop your own position with regard to the concerns involved.